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ON COMPARING CULTURAL FORMS

The paper intends to study the possibility of evading the relativist dilemma: when you compare cultural forms belonging to different traditions, you either impose the result from outside, or you give up comparisons altogether as dependent on the arbiter's parochial choices. In this paper one argues that, apart from this kind of comparison, which is called extrinsic, there is another type, called intrinsic, which is not dependent on arbiter's choices. The essence of the intrinsic comparison is the role played by the "second option" of the representatives of different traditions: it is decisive what these representatives prefer in the second place, when their first options have to be abandoned. Two old stories provide the historical paradigm of the intrinsic comparison: how Volga Khazarians are said to have converted to Judaism in the 8th century, and how the Athenian general Themistocles was voted the best general by the confederate Greek representatives. An example of contemporary intrinsic comparison between three contemporary trends – relativism, fundamentalism, rationalism – is also presented. Contrary to what Ernest Gellner believes, these trends are not incommensurable; rationalism takes precedence while being the second option of the other two trends, as soon as they want to enter a public debate.

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1. Can we *validly* compare forms and ideologies belonging to different cultures, traditions and *Weltanschauungs*?¹ The conventional answer is that we can only to the extent that we are in possession of universal, rational standards, enabling us to assess cultural forms and values in a non-parochial way. In fact, the very existence of such standards has been called into question times and again and some philosophers claim that one has to reject it altogether. Cultural comparisons are neither objectively valid, nor morally legitimate, they argue. What comparisons amount to is to covertly impose the standards of those who initiated them in the name of some allegedly universal rule or principle. As no such rule or principle, independent of one's own community and tradition, really exists, they say, most, if not all cultural comparisons lead to an unfair game, forced by the powerful on the weak: the former extract the benefits from the comparison, while the latter are always harmed and wronged.

For instance, this is what Jean-François Lyotard, like many postmodern thinkers, believes to be the case, as we learn from his "différend" theory:

"A case of *différend* takes place between two parties when the settlement of the conflict which opposes them is done in the idiom of one of them, while the wrong suffered by the other party cannot be signified in this idiom" - he writes².

However, the decision to wholly give up comparing and judging different cultures and traditions, in order to avoid causing harm to any of them, is also very questionable.

Take for instance this radical statement of Paul Feyerabend: "Traditions are neither good, nor bad: they simply exist. Speaking objectively, i.e. independently of taking part in a tradition, one almost cannot choose between humanitarianism and antisemitism."³

Now, so defiant a statement is not just another innocuous, scholastic formula, restricted to universities walls. For, as Barbara Lipstadt, a researcher of the Holocaust denial, once noticed:

"In academic circles some scholars spoke of relative truths, rejecting the notion that there was one version of the world that was necessary right, while another was wrong... Because deconstructionism argued that experience was relative and nothing was fixed, it created an atmosphere of permissiveness toward questioning the meaning of historical events and made it hard for its proponents to assert that there was anything "off limits" for this skeptical approach." ⁴

A few years after she wrote these words, she was sued by David Irving, a well-known denier of the Holocaust. He claimed that in one of her books Ms. Lipstadt had wrecked his reputation of an allegedly honest historian. He rejected the charge of antisemitism Lipstadt had brought to him in that book. Striking a relativistic chord very much in tune with Feyerabend's statement, Irving claimed that in his own works he just made use of "non-conventional history writing" as well as of "alternative" standards of assessment which the so-called "main-stream standards" fail to objectively refute, because none of these can lay claim to possessing a universal value. He eventually lost his case, but imagine how P. Feyerabend, R. Rorty, J.-F. Lyotard, or G. Deleuze would have ruled as judges had they stuck to their relativistic philosophy while in court!

When, in the '90-s, Erich Honecker, the former leader of the former Communist Germany, was put on trial, his lawyers asked the court to judge him according to the laws of the German Democratic Republic - a state that had ceased to exist by then but which had been recognized by the international community prior to 1990. That request implicitly meant that the former Communist leader could not be tried at all. In fact Honecker was charged with severe violations of universal human rights, which are supposed to overrule any "positive law". But how can we make sure that these universal rights do really exist and are not just a mind-construct and a hypocritical pretext, alleged by the winners?

Actually, some important contemporary philosophers believe that their very existence is highly questionable. For instance, Alasdair

MacIntyre claimed that the belief in the reality of universal human rights is quite unsound:

“The best argument I can invoke in favor of the brutality of my claim is of exactly the same kind as the most plausible argument we invoke when we say that there are no witches and unicorns: every attempt to produce valid arguments for the belief in the existence of such rights has failed.”⁵

Consequently, it is dubious whether we are reasonably entitled to put on trial some murderous political scoundrels like Honecker, Milosevic or Saddam Hussein. Indeed, on the one hand, as sensible people, we are able to prove neither the existence of witches and unicorns, nor the existence of the universal Justice. On the other, as liberals, we are unwilling to expeditiously try political criminals in the name of the infamous so-called “winners’ justice”. Would it be fairer, then, not to try them at all?

Or, take J. Baudrillard’s attempt of making sense of 9/11 attacks in an article published in the French daily *Le Monde*⁶ not long after the event: in that monstrous terrorist act he saw a natural and understandable reaction against “globalization” and the alleged American world hegemony. So far, his allegations could look like just too elementary, value-free, an explanation; yet he slipped quickly from this “logic of explanation” to a dire “logic of justification”:

“That we have been dreaming of that event, that everybody, with no exception, has, because no one can refrain from dreaming of the destruction of whatever power which has become that much hegemonic, that is unacceptable to the Western moral consciousness. Yet, this is a fact, measured only by the pathological violence of all discourses which attempt to suppress it.”

This dangerous slip of his judgment and the entanglement of the two logics are highly indicative of how far Baudrillard went in downgrading the moral consciousness of man, as manifestation of the universality of the “moral law”, to the level of just a parochial and biased “Western moral consciousness”.

I do not know the extent to which one or another relativist philosopher is prepared to openly assume the practical consequences of his/her theories and to exculpate terrorism, fundamentalism, dictatorship or xenophobia, just because he/she believes that there are no universally and objectively valid ways to reject these cultural “options”. I assume that, luckily enough, in most cases he/she is not prepared to go this far, if anything but to live up to the standards set by one’s own ideas is a task most modern philosophers almost totally gave up. It would be nevertheless reckless in my view not to care for these possible consequences of philosophers’ sophistic theories. At any rate I think that we should not leave the matter at this point and that we should try to refute as much as we can the following postmodern thesis: *any cultural comparison necessarily introduces the standards of the arbiter (or of one player), thus upsetting the fairness of the game.*

But in case we reject relativism, will it be still possible to resuscitate some old version of a renewed *essentialism*, of some “great narrative” about Reality, Truth or Good, upon which some universal criteria for our comparisons could firmly rely, as they did in the past? I do not think it possible, either. Indeed, relativists are not totally wrong in urging us to bury all “great narratives” and to replace “essentialism” and “objectivity” with various kinds of “pragmatism”.

It is highly unlikely that the classical rationality could ever be restored in its old and once splendid shape. In our late age its foundation became far too eroded and shaky to accept an independent and stable re-thinking. And, furthermore, how and on which basis are we going to choose among so many ideological gods whose wars never end?

Hence our main problem: which are the *models* whereof we can we make use, when we compare various cultural systems and cultural forms or traditions? If we feel compelled to do away with the old, essentialist models, can we still objectively and inter-subjectively compare such cultural forms at all? Does not any comparison, whatever the kind, amount to a parochial and biased judgment, serving only as a weapon of domination? Between the entrenched positions of both relativists and essentialists is there a “third place” still available?

2. Of course, cultural comparisons are no modern invention. In an almost quintessential form we meet them in the medieval “religion contests” held between the representatives of different, competing religions, in front of a king or a bishop. For instance, at Limoges, France, in 1010, a subtle theological disputation between Christian doctors and Jewish rabbis took place, with the purpose of establishing which religion was the best. After the bishop finally decided that the Christian doctors carried the day, he issued a less subtle decree to force the Jews from his parish into baptism.

In 922, the prince of Kiev, Vladimir, by then still a pagan, chaired a similar theological dispute between a Muslim, a Jew, a Catholic and a Byzantine Orthodox. After listening to their various arguments, Vladimir rejected Islam, for it forbade to drink alcohol, he rejected Catholicism, too, for it recommended fasting, he did not accept Judaism either, for the Jews were not reigning over Jerusalem anymore; but he decided to convert to Greek Orthodoxy, when his ambassadors, just arrived from Constantinople, told him about the splendors of St. Sophia.⁷ In other words, the Russian prince converted to the religion he found more suited to his own particular tastes and biases, as the bishop of Limoges granted the victory to the Christians, just because he was a Christian. In both cases, the decision – whatever it was – was the result of a judgment made by a particular arbiter, who took sides in the game and was biased in favor of one competing party. Accordingly, the decision would have certainly changed should the arbiter have been a different person.

I propose to call comparisons of this kind “extrinsic”, since the criteria of the comparison are imposed to the players from outside and, therefore, the outcome can change, being bound to the presence of one particular arbiter, instead of another. Comparison decisions rely almost completely upon the arbiter’s *primary* philosophical and ethical choices, which existed long before the dispute itself took place. Therefore, arguments brought into dispute serve merely as a *means of legitimization* of these previous, *primary* choices, rather than as a means of founding them truly rationally. “Le différend”, in Lyotard’s terms, actually makes sense here, bringing about the following dilemma: either you reject any comparison of the kind, any “religions contest” that falls outside one single value-system; or, in case you still wish to engage in cultural comparisons between different traditions, you must admit that the outcome may greatly vary with respect to various particular circumstances, tastes and arbiters: there is no objective and rational way to single out one result in preference to any other.

Therefore, cultural parochialism and relativism remain *theoretically* invincible as long as we imagine cultural comparisons *only as extrinsic*, and as long as *all* “religion contests” are supposed to take place according to the lines of the above-mentioned model. The question is, then: is that model the only existing one?

3. Around 950, Hasdai ibn Shaprut, the Jewish court physician and the minister of the emir of Cordoba, sent a letter to the *kagan* (king) of the Volga Khazarians, Joseph. Hasdai wanted to know more about this strange people, the Khazarians, who were said to have converted to Judaism some two hundred years earlier. A few years later (letters used to fare very slowly in those days), Joseph’s answer came in and Hasdai had the opportunity to learn how the ancestor of Joseph, Bulan, had actually converted to Judaism.⁸

As in the case of Vladimir of Kiev, the conversion took place seemingly after a religion contest: after the representatives of Christianity, Islam and Judaism were summoned before the still pagan prince, they were urged to argue about the pluses and the minuses of their respective faiths. Of course, for a time the issue remained objectively equivocal, for each advocate praised his own creed as much as he could, while trying to tarnish the two others.

Yet, the similarity with Vladimir’s conversion stops here: for instead of deciding the victory according to his own previous tastes and biases, as Vladimir did, Bulan adopted a different strategy: he asked the Christian to tell which of the two other monotheistic religions, apart from his own, seemed to him to be closer to the Truth and second only to Christianity. *The Christian chose Judaism*. The *kagan* proceeded similarly with the Muslim, who, at his turn, *found Judaism* second only to Islam with respect to the Truth. At that moment, Bulan declared Judaism the winner of the contest,

because it had got not only its own testimony, but also the testimony of the two other rival religions.

Interestingly, we also have another version of Bulan's conversion, coming from an Arab writer. In this version, it was not the prince who played the role of the arbiter. The Jew himself asked the Christian to tell what he was thinking about Moses and the Torah. The Christian agreed that Moses was a great prophet and that the Torah tells the truth, while he claimed that Jesus was the Son of God. But the Jew responded: "*I do not know his doctrine, while he acknowledges mine*". A similar dialogue was supposed to have taken place between the Jew and the Muslim, who also acknowledged the sanctity of the Torah, while the Jew would not concede to the sanctity of the Koran. Of course, the Jew was declared winner.

Let us make clear immediately that for our research it is of no importance whether the conversion of the Khazarians to Judaism really took place in this way, although there is no reason for totally rejecting this possibility. For it is not so much the historical authenticity of the story that matters here, as its capacity to provide the model, the *Idealtypus* of a cultural comparison, which is strikingly different from the *extrinsic* comparison we have just examined above. We believe that this *Idealtypus* can provide the pattern of a cultural comparison that, under some restrictions (which we shall address later), can produce stable results, no matter who the arbiter of the contest is and which kind of cultural forms we are comparing - religions, ideologies, or ethical attitudes, etc. We shall call this comparison "*intrinsic comparison*". Let us examine it closer:

Unlike the *extrinsic* comparison, the *intrinsic* comparison consists in a *two-rounds (or two layers) process*:

In the first round, the advocates of the three religions and of the three sacred books are asked to tell which religion or sacred book they mostly value or consider to be the most true. Obviously, each of them designates his own religion or sacred book as the best. Let us give two points to each of them. The first round ends in a tie, after the three competitors expressed their first options.

In the second round the tie will be broken: now the competitors are asked to tell which religion they value as next to their own, as *their second option*. Both the Christian and the Muslim necessarily designate Judaism or rather the Old Testament as their second choice, while the Jew has no second option distinctive from his first, for he sees no holiness in either the New Testament or the Koran. Now, if we grant just one point to the religion chosen as the second option, we will see Judaism finally collecting 4 points (2 from the Jew as his first option, and just one point from each of the other two competitors as their second option,) while the two other religions will collect just 2 points each.

Fig. 1. The two rounds of the Khazarian contest

<i>the Jew</i>		<i>the Christian</i>		<i>the Muslim</i>	
<i>gives</i>	<i>collects</i>	<i>gives</i>	<i>collects</i>	<i>gives</i>	<i>collects</i>
<i>I.</i> <i>2pts.</i>	<i>I.</i> <i>2pts.</i>	<i>I.</i> <i>2 pts.</i>	<i>I.</i> <i>2 pts.</i>	<i>I.</i> <i>2 pts.</i>	<i>I.</i> <i>2pts.</i>
<i>II.</i> <i>0 pt.</i>	<i>II.</i> <i>1+1 pts</i>	<i>II.</i> <i>1 pt.</i>	<i>II.</i> <i>0 pt.</i>	<i>II</i> <i>1 pt.</i>	<i>II.</i> <i>0 pt.</i>
<i>4 pt.</i>		<i>2 pt.</i>		<i>2 pt.</i>	

The discriminative procedure followed by Bulan, though being relatively rare, is not unparalleled. A very similar procedure was allegedly used by the Greek generals after the victory of Salamis. As they were unable to decide which of them was to be awarded the prize of having been the most valiant general, they resorted to a vote, Plutarch tells us. They were asked to write on their ballot the names of both the best and the second best commander. While each one considered himself to be the most valiant of all, everybody agreed to grant Themistocles the second place. Therefore, Themistocles emerged as winner, having collected the most votes, as everybody's second choice.⁹

4. It is time now to point out a few essential characteristics of the intrinsic comparison, which we have to examine against the background of the extrinsic comparison.

a) The circumstance that we have the story of the "Khazarian contest" in two versions (and accordingly, the discriminating questions were asked by different people) suggests that the outcome of the intrinsic comparison depends neither on the person of the arbiter, nor on his convictions, provided the general scheme is preserved. The outcome is, therefore, inter-subjective and can be universalized. The precedence of the "second option", unlike the victory of the "first option", relies upon the inner effective relations between the cultural forms, i.e. upon some objective connections that may have remained hidden, ignored or unacceptable for a time, but which the procedure of the Khazarian contest helps re-emerge. In this case, we have the textual, historical, theological and conceptual dependence of both the Koran and the New Testament on the Old Testament.

Of course, one may suspect that the shrewd Themistocles invented himself the "two options" procedure, because, as he wished to score victory just as much as anyone else, he knew that the jealousy and the pride of the Greek generals left him no other way to win. Yet, the

procedure itself need not be viewed as parochial and idiosyncratic, since it would always have brought about the same outcome – Themistocles' victory – irrespective of the person who would have devised it. And this outcome was obviously due to the fact that Themistocles was really the best commander. All fellow-generals knew it; yet they could not bring themselves to openly admit it.

However, one may object that, even if it is true that *any arbiter who follows* the procedure of the Khazarian contest will get the same result, it is not necessary that any arbiter would follow the procedure of the Khazarian contest. Why, after all, would this procedure take precedence over any other and why, accordingly, one should follow it? My answer is that one should follow it, if one wants to get an outcome independent of any parochial positioning. Obviously, not *any arbiter* will necessarily follow the intrinsic comparison; but we can affirm that, ultimately, *any rational arbiter* will, provided he/she knows it is the only way to reach an inter-subjective, non-parochial outcome. For this is what reason is all about: it strives to reach a result that can be universalized, as being independent of any particular, parochial circumstances and viewpoints. Therefore, the decision to follow *knowingly* a rational procedure is itself rational. And furthermore: this is exactly the goal we were aiming at: to establish some possibility of a *rational procedure* of comparing alternative value-systems, rather than to force them at any cost on those who may wish to act differently.

One may still object that there is no need at all to behave rationally. Of course, in some area – e.g. in love – there is no such need. But if the goal is to reach a freely shared and stable decision or attitude within a group, a rational procedure seems to produce the best result. One clear benefit may be the chance to put an end (no matter how provisional) to destructive internal strife. Themistocles, for instance, knew well that the alliance of the Greek states against Persia had no future, unless a winner of the contest was freely accepted by all generals.

I presume that no relativist is prepared to appear irrational in matters of general concern; presumably, he/she will defend a lukewarm rationality, contending that it is of many kinds and it need not be universal. Any procedure will do, as far as it is accepted within one community, he/she will argue.¹⁰ One could both accept “ethnocentricity” (to speak like R.Rorty) and remain rational.¹¹ But this is nonsense: rationality is universal by definition. There must be one single rationality, or else we use the term “rationality” *equivocally*, as Aristotle would say.

b) Therefore, what ensures the precedence of the Old Testament over the other Holy Scriptures in the Khazarian contest, or Themistocles' victory in the contest for the prize of honor is the *second option*, i.e. what a majority chooses as only secondary in value. The extrinsic comparison always relies upon the first option: here the arbiter decides just on the

basis of what he personally loves most. On the contrary, the intrinsic comparison is set in motion by second options. In this case, what becomes significant is only the *secondary*: what people love, like, prefer only as their second option, when, for one reason or another, their most powerful wishes are frustrated and must be adjourned or abandoned altogether.

Now, while the first option is very much personalized, parochial, partisan, usually passionate, the second option, being less imperative, is less personalized, less specific and dispassionate. What we like most individualizes us as much as it severs us from one another, whereas what we consider a lesser good makes us join up with one another. Because it presupposes a less noisy, yet a more general consent, it varies more rarely and stays outside the whims of ever-changing tastes and customs. The second option sets in as a strategy of rational choice, after people abandon their passionate and idiosyncratic first options, as in the cases of the Khazarian or Themistoclean contests. Therefore, there are much fewer available second options than first options and this is precisely what makes the former more enduring and unwavering.

c) But what exactly does the outcome of the intrinsic comparison bring about? Could it be, as in our case, an outright victory of Judaism? Probably not, in spite of the conversion of Bulan. In fact, it is interesting that the scheme of the Khazarian contest can also be relevant for the general situation, where none of the participants would admit a coincidence between his first and his second option. In that case, the Jew would rather choose the Talmud as his first option, and the Old Testament (Torah) - like the two others - as his second option. It is obvious that the Old Testament would still score 3 points, while all the other three Holy Books will collect just 2 points each.

This *generalized form* of the Khazarian contest - embedded somehow in the “special” one - shows that, in fact, what prevails is not so much a fully developed, historical Judaism, but rather a sort of primitive, *common* Judaism, based strictly on the Old Testament and providing the historical and theological root of the other “religions of the Book”. Nevertheless, historically and ethnically there is a much stronger link between the Old Testament and the Talmud than between the former and the New Testament or the Koran. Consequently, the final precedence of the second option tells us not so much *what to do* (this is why Bulan’s conversion was somehow precipitous), but rather *what not to do*. It tells the Christian, for instance, that he should not reject Judaism and the Old Testament, or else he will put in jeopardy Christianity itself. It makes visible the “interior Jew” existing in every Christian (or Muslim) and incidentally it sheds light on the theological incongruity of Christian or Muslim anti-Semitism.

But there is also an other consequence, much more general, that intrinsic comparisons can bring about, as especially Themistocles’ contest clearly shows it: *a freely accepted peace among competing parties*. For none of these parties will be as prone to challenge the resolution as unfair, as it

would have been were the extrinsic, and not the intrinsic, comparison enforced. Indeed, it was not somebody's superior might or authority that forced the resolution of the intrinsic comparison on the competitors, but it emerged as the outcome of their common, freely-expressed will. I am not proclaiming some sort of utopia; peace will not endure forever, nor is intrinsic comparison always and everywhere possible. Still, it is a good weapon to refute relativists' destructive claims, such as Lyotard's, that no peaceful and freely accepted conflict resolution is possible. And while I am not so naïve as to believe that relativists will suddenly surrender upon reading this paper, I hope that at least their opponents will be discovering here some new arguments which might help them be a little better equipped for the fight.

In general, contrary to the "strong", first option-based, extrinsic comparison, which brings about a decisive victory of one competitor over the rest who are forced into submission, the intrinsic comparison is "weak" (not necessarily in the sense of Vattimo's "pensiero debole") and modest. It shows just that there is one competitor that cannot be done away with, or else the remaining competitors themselves might get in trouble. It does not establish a strong hierarchy, but just an inner precedence of the second option. Yet this modest precedence has all the advantages of endurance, rationality and independence from any arbiter's criteria.

d) Another obvious and important difference between the two kinds of cultural comparison is the following: the extrinsic comparison is wholly unrestricted: by means of it one can compare no matter what cultural forms and values, just because the first options of the arbiter - which may be extremely diverse and idiosyncratic - impose this comparison.

On the contrary, the intrinsic comparison has only a limited scope: one cannot submit all cultures and values to it, but just those wherein an underlying second option is really present. Intrinsic comparisons rely on reality which they only make manifest. For instance, if a Buddhist monk had taken part in the Khazarian contest along with the other competitors, there would have been no way to discriminate between him and the others competitors, for there is no second option underneath the Buddhist and the Abrahamic faiths. If Themistocles hadn't really been the best of all Greek generals, he could never have scored that major victory over the rest, no matter what procedure he could have imagined. As I have already said, all other generals knew he was the best; yet they could not publicly admit it and vote him accordingly as their first choice, for such an admission would have hurt their pride deeply. Nevertheless, they consented to grant him their unanimous and more reasonable second option, less influenced by whims and pride.

Precisely because the second option makes manifest some really objective, yet concealed relations, *one cannot and should not apply it and everywhere and in every case*. Therefore, these are the two main limitations

of the intrinsic comparison: it is “weak”, telling us *what not to do* rather than *what to do*; it has a limited scope and cannot work everywhere. But what matters most is that it does not depend on a specific set of metaphysical conceptions; therefore, one may use it to discriminate among representatives of different metaphysical world-views with similar effects, no matter who the arbiter is and what his philosophy might be.

4. Now, let us suppose that the dilemma of Bulan would be to convert himself and his people to a political and ideological system of modernity. Of course, this conversion will be the outcome of a comparison between these ideologies. In general, such comparisons are extrinsic, for they use a certain set of metaphysical presuppositions of an arbiter as a means of setting comparison standards. Obviously, as soon as these presuppositions change, so do standards and so does the outcome of the comparison. The question to face is, then: *is it possible to establish a precedence of a certain system - for instance of the liberal democracy - in a rational, objective way, notwithstanding the metaphysical presuppositions of the arbiter?*

So suppose that a fascist, a communist and a liberal would show up in front of Bulan. As it previously was the case, after the first round of the debate, during which each of them extolled his own ideology and reviled the one of the others, the competition ended in a tie. Which, then, is the discriminating question to ask in order to break the tie?

The most simple one and which avoids any ideological metaphysics is, in my opinion, to ask the representatives to tell which political regime they would prefer to live under, after renouncing their own as practically not available. We may discover the right answer already in Plato's *Republic*, - an answer all the more significant, since the first option of this philosopher was set on a kind of authoritarian state.

Speaking about how life looks like in a democracy, he says that there “everyone would arrange a plan for leading his own life in the way that pleases him.”. And he adds further:

“Owing to this license, democracy includes all kinds of political regimes, and it seems likely that anyone who wishes to organize a state... must find his way to a democratic city and select the model that pleases him, as in a bazaar of constitutions, and, after making his choice, establish his own constitution.”¹²

So, Plato says, when someone cannot live under his favorite regime any longer, he may still find a haven in democracy, where he can re-build his own regime on a small scale, as if it were a small shop within a large “bazaar”. Therefore, the second option of these non-democratic individuals rests with the liberal democracy, while the liberal is the only one who has no second option distinctive from the first one, since he is going to be heavily persecuted in all non-democratic regimes, if he is forced to live there. Thus, the democratic regime (the “bazaar of constitutions”) will collect more points than its political-ideological rivals

in the second round of the contest, while invoking no ideological and metaphysical presuppositions. Briefly, I consider this a demonstration of the precedence liberal democracy takes when based on the second option.

Fig. 2

the democrat		the communist		the fascist	
gives	collects	gives	collects	gives	collects
I. 2pts.	I. 2pts.	I. 2 pts.	I. 2 pts.	I. 2 pts.	I. 2 pts
II. 0 pt.	II. 1+1pts	II. 1 pt.	II. 0 pt.	II. 1 pt.	II. 0 pt.
4 pt.		2 pt.		2 pt.	

I think that the meaning of that victory is twofold: first, against relativists, it shows that one can legitimately compare at least some political systems and ideological values, and that one can sensibly declare some of them to be better than the others, while refraining from adopting any hard, essentialist theory on the ultimate good.

Secondly, it may explain why in history, no matter how slowly and contradictorily, liberal democracy has been tending to overcome its rivals. With the collapse of communism in Russia and Eastern Europe, we witnessed a re-surfacing of a liberal second option, for long concealed under the brutish layers of the “real socialism”. Indeed, what Gorbachev, A. Iakovlev and the rest of the “ perestroika reformers” tried to do was neither to replace socialism, nor to “reform” it, but to retrieve its “real” roots, allegedly neglected by Stalin and his successors. But in fact they helped the second, liberal option of socialism re-emerge and become dominant. You cannot expel or reject the second option of a cultural system unpunished for very long - this is perhaps a noteworthy lesson history has taught us.

4. Let us focus on another comparison case: while examining some major contemporary political ideas, Ernest Gellner came to the conclusion that, unlike the past, dominated by binary ideological conflicts, our age witnesses three major ideological actors, which form a “triangular situation”, as he said, i.e.: religious fundamentalism (Fu), postmodern relativism (Re) and rationalism (Ra). According to him, these three philosophies are irreducible to one another, which means that, in our terms, they could not be compared but in a extrinsic way with one another.

It is a serious relativistic consequence. Nevertheless, Gellner said, “Any pair of the three has some features in common”. And, clarifying what he meant, he added:

“Rationalism shares with monotheistic exclusive scriptural religion the belief in the existence of a unique truth, instead of an endless plurality of meaning-systems; but it repudiates the idea that this unique vision is related to a privileged Source, and could even be definitive. It shares with hermeneutic relativism the repudiation of the claim that a substantive, final and definitive version of the truth is available.”¹³

This brief characterization of the three thought-systems, elementary though it may sound, seems acceptable to me; yet, I deem the “triangular” situation supposed to exist between them to be inappropriate: indeed, even from Gellner’s own description it is impossible to discover any important common feature between relativism and fundamentalism. Therefore, the figure that can properly depict the relation among the three ideologies is a straight line with three equidistant points on it rather than a triangle. Obviously, rationalism will occupy the middle of this line, as it resembles more either of the extremes, than these resemble each other.

Now, if we assign to each trend two binary marks, corresponding to the way the trend understands truth - which can be deemed either revealed (+) , or not-revealed (-); and also either unique (+), or not-unique (-), we get the following matrix:

Fig.3

trends	truth: revealed/not-revealed	truth: unique/not-unique
Fu	+	+
Ra	-	+
Re	-	-

(Fu=fundamentalism; Ra=rationalism; Re=relativism)

It seems obvious that the second option of both extremes (i.e. of someone who would choose the extreme world-views as his first option) must be Ra. Actually, if both the fundamentalist and the relativist were hindered from having their own way, they would choose rationalism as their second option, because it has still one feature in common with their own world-views. As for Ra, we may admit that he has no second option distinct from his first one. Indeed, like Buridan’s famous donkey, he has no reason to prefer Fu rather than Re, because the ideological distance between himself and either of these philosophies is the same: one single feature.

There is also another, perhaps more decisive way of intrinsically comparing Ra, Re and Fu. We have only to divide the general contest into three separate games played by each possible pair of representatives and to declare winner the representative who finally would collect most points.

It is also necessary to admit the possibility of a debate between each pair formed from the three representatives, and to accept that there can be no debate without a minimal common ground.

Now if we imagine Fu and Re entering a debate, we notice immediately that there is no other way to decide between them, but by means of an *extrinsic* comparison; indeed there is no common ground between them, as the matrix clearly shows it.

Things look different in a debate confronting Fu and Ra. They can start debating, for they share one feature at least: that truth is unique and objective; but they have also something important that separates them: the problem of Revelation. So after expressing their first options, what will happen? Ra will not change his view, for he cannot accept the Revelation, but as the debate continues, he (or somebody else, the kagan, for that matter) may make Fu attentive of the fact that, since he agreed to take part in a debate, he also implicitly agreed *that truth is neither manifest, nor revealed*. Otherwise it would be preposterous to engage the debate, for a debate necessarily presupposes that truth is uncertain, non-manifest, non-revealed and that the only way to reach it is by means of a dialectic, contradictory process, which is exactly what the debate is aiming at. Of course, Fu may hate the idea of a public debate, but, provided he feigns to take part in it (for instance at TV), he must abide by its rules and implicitly assume its basic presuppositions. Consequently, Fu will have to agree (it does not matter whether openly or not), apart from the fact that there is a unique truth, that one can reach truth by debate and not only by Revelation. It means that the fundamentalist's second option turns out to be set on rationalism as soon as he agrees to take part in the debate. Rationalism will prevail, therefore, as fundamentalist's implicit, concealed second option. (Or rather as the second option of a fundamentalist *who agreed to take part in a debate*.)

Finally, the contest between Ra and Re is taking place. Again, there is a common ground between participants - the idea that truth is neither revealed, nor manifest - which means that the debate can start. But while for the former contender truth is unique (or at least, provisionally so, for the time being), for the latter truth is always plural and diverse. Again they seem cornered in a tie after having expressed their first options. But, then, the relativist will have to agree that, since he consented to engage the debate, there must be one single non-subjective truth, which can be searched for only by a debate and which does not depend solely on a subjective viewpoint. For a debate is a game that must aim at achieving one player's victory - no matter how provisional and partial - or else it is nonsense.¹⁴ To say "anything goes", i.e. everybody wins, simply destroys *la*

raison d'être of any competitive game, including a debate or a controversy. Therefore, once more, after having formulated their second option, it becomes obvious that the rationalist has scored a victory, having collected more points than the relativist, provided the latter agreed to take part to the game.

Summing up, after these three games Ra is in a position to prevail over his adversaries, because he succeeded in collecting the second options of both Re and Fu. Therefore, Gellner may be said wrong in regarding the three trends as “equidistant”. Furthermore, he is wrong in believing that they are “irreducible” to one another. If one takes their second option seriously, two of them show a concealed dependence on rationalism, at least manifested as soon they are ready to join in a debate. And finally, one has to admit that our anti-relativist conclusion is not based on a metaphysical assumption of what Truth or the Good might be, but only on the fact that *engaging a dialogue or a debate creates some sort of intellectual obligations* one has to abide by further on.

Of course, one could object that such a debate is quite utopian, since fundamentalists prefer to use bombs rather than words in order to make their views prevail, and relativists usually try to distort the meaning of the words in order to avoid defeat. But one has to remember that what we attempted to do here was just to reject the relativist claim according to which there is no *rational* way to discriminate between cultures and world-views and that all traditions are equally worthy. I think I provided the proof that such a discrimination is possible in many cases within the realm of a rational, effective dialogue, based on an intrinsic comparison procedure. And this holds even if one refrains from invoking an essentialist theory on the ultimate Good - a theory relativism perhaps rightly rejects. Naturally one may always reject the debate and pull the trigger - this is what fundamentalists actually often do. But in this case no one, and least of all fundamentalists themselves, can produce any moral and rational justification of such actions. As I have already said, I hope to convince neither relativists, nor fundamentalists, but just to comfort rationalists that they have good reasons to stand up the present-day anti-rationalistic sweeping tide.

I wish to add that, on the one hand, insofar as a common second option establishes the conditions of the possibility of a debate among advocates of different traditions, the intrinsic comparison produces a “transcendental argument” against relativism, coming close to the general transcendental argument formulated by K.O. Apel.¹⁵ But on the other hand, I think that the cultural comparison is more than just another argument against relativism: for it does not content itself with refuting relativism, but it attempts to overcome it effectively by providing us with a “positive” means of comparing and evaluating cultural forms, traditions and ideologies. This deserves attention, for, unless a “positive” theory can be established, the skeptic could still argue that the possible inconsistency of

relativism (well-known since Plato and Aristotle) does not necessarily lead to the victory of any of its opponents.

What relativists ignore is the major value of the *second option* and of the intrinsic comparison that follows it. Thanks to this kind of comparisons, our cultural disputes can reach a stable, inter-subjective, non-arbitrary resolution. Many value-systems are far from being equivalent, equally right or wrong, depending solely on who the judge is - as relativists usually contend. Even if there is no Supreme Court of Reason, where every value is checked against a universal and eternal standard - as essentialists believe - I see as mere sophistry to try to justify terrorism or any other murder or misdemeanor in the name of "cultural differences" or "the right to resist Western globalism". Of course, this world is not as consistent and orderly as old metaphysics used to teach us. Yet it is not as chaotic, fragmented and meaningless, as some postmodern thinkers want us to believe. And, while one cannot prove it is "the best of all possible worlds", as once Leibniz hoped, nevertheless it might be not the worst of all, either, unless we contribute by our deeds and words to its becoming so.

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Notes

¹ This paper represents the core of my book, *Turnirul khazar*, (București: Nemira, 1997; Iași: Polirom, 2003) An abridged version was presented as a lecture for SCIRI, Cluj, 2007.

² Jean-François Lyotard, *Le Différend*, (Paris: ed. de Minuit, 1983), 24 : "Un cas de différend entre deux parties a lieu quand le «règlement» du conflit qui les oppose se fait dans l'idiome de l'une d'elles, alors que le tort dont l'autre souffre ne se signifie pas dans cet idiome."

³ Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method*, (London, New York: Verso, 1996), 225.

⁴ Deborah E. Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust*, (New York: Free Press, 1996), 23.

⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, (Notre Dame, In: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 94.

⁶ Jean Baudrillard, "L'esprit du terrorisme", *Le Monde*, (02.11.2001): "Que nous ayons rêvé de cet événement, que tout le monde sans exception en ait rêvé, parce que nul ne peut ne pas rêver de la destruction de n'importe quelle puissance devenue à ce point hégémonique, cela est inacceptable pour la conscience morale occidentale, mais c'est pourtant un fait, et qui se mesure justement à la violence pathétique de tous les discours qui veulent l'effacer."

⁷ Andrei Oisteanu, "Normanzii și disputele teologice medievale", *Secolul XX*, (1995): 335-337.

⁸ D.M. Dunlop, *The History of the Jewish Khazars*, (New-York: Schocken Books, 1967), 97.

⁹ Plutarch, *Themistocles' Life*, 17.

¹⁰ Barbara Herrnstein-Smith, *Belief and Resistance. Dynamics of Contemporary Intellectual Controversy*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 76-77.

¹¹ Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or objectivity" *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, I, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

¹² Plato, *Republic*, 557c-d. (translation by Paul Shorey)

¹³ Ernest Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 84.

¹⁴ Of course, one must not confuse actual victory with aiming at victory. A game may end in a tie, but must not aim at achieving a tie.

¹⁵ Karl Otto Apel, „Is the Ethics of the Ideal Communication Community a Utopia”, Seyla Benhabib, Fred Dallmayr (eds.), *The Communicative Ethics Controversy*, (Cambridge, London: The M.I.T. Press, 1990), 24-28.